ABSTRACT

The paper highlights the issue of marginalization from the perspectives of the Naxalites. The novel Footprints in the Bajra is a study as to why people in the Bajra belt of rural Bihar resort to Naxalism. The extreme poverty and exploitation at the hands of rich landlords and the government’s apathy have driven the people on the fringes to pick up the gun. The paper also highlights the condition of women in the bajra belt. The novel articulates class based violence and oppression. The paper portrays the tilting scales of power where gun is the only means to fight back oppression.

Keywords: Subalterns; Marginalization; Oppression; Naxalism

Subaltern studies have recently occupied centre stage in the Postcolonial cultural studies where the study revolves around people and groups from the margins. Critics like Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak and Ranajit Guha have been associated with the subaltern studies group. It is strongly felt that the subalterns have to be represented as they are denied any voice for they cannot speak for themselves, they have to be represented.

The novel under study Footprints in the Bajra is written by Nabina Das where the novelist speaks about the marginalized people of rural areas who have been denied any access to development, education, health care and even basic necessities of life. The class under discussion is landless peasants whose land has been taken away by either big landlords or industrialists. Finding no other option these people have resorted to gun to claim back their right to living. The novel is a saga of the marginalized class of the fictional village of Durjanpur set in the bajra belt of rural Bihar. The region under discussion is a hotbed of the red brigade- The Maoists.

Before delving deep, a look at marginalization discusses it as a socio-political phenomenon based on power politics and aims at defining social, cultural, economic and cultural space occupied by certain individuals in a given time and space in which the dominant group controls the behavior of the marginalized group. Marginality is a condition indicating positionality of a subject defined in terms of the limitations on an individual’s accessibility to power. Bill Ashcroft defines “marginal” as:

The perception and description of experience as “marginal” is a consequence of the binaristic structure of various kinds of dominant discourses; such as patriarchy, imperialism and ethno-centrism, which imply that certain forms of experiences are peripheral. Although the term carries a misleading geometric implication, marginal groups do not necessarily endorse the notion of a fixed center. Structures of power that are described in terms of “center” and “margin” operate, in reality in a complex, diffuse and multifaceted way. The marginal therefore, describes a positionality that is best defined in terms of the limitations of the subject’s access to power. (121)

In Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology, Lee is of the view, “marginality is defined only in relation to centrality” (30). He explains the term ‘margin’ as “a nexus where two or three worlds are
interconnected in an open ended and unfolding horizon” (47). Germani defines marginality in terms of exclusion as it is “the lack of participation of individuals and groups in those spheres in which, according to determined criteria, they might be expected to participate” (49). Oxford English Dictionary defines the term ‘marginalized’ as “oppressed”, “downtrodden”, “pressed, weighed down physically” or “mentally, burdened, troubled, depressed, reduced to straits” or “difficulties, especially harnessed or crushed down to tyranny or unjust treatment”.

Footprints in the Bajra which is a novel about oppression, struggle, revolution and change. Revolution and change are not mere decorative words but they are agents of change in a place where the divides are taller than multistoried shopping malls and sky licking urban ghettos. Through the story of Nora, Muskaan, Avadhut and Suryakant Sahay and their encounters with each other, the novelist portrays deep rooted stories of oppression and marginalization faced by rural peasants in badland topography of northern Bihar; in the backdrop of Maoist activities. It reveals a young rebel, with a far more radical possibility of changing not only her own life, but also her community where century old causes have generated archaic and unsettling effects “(Das 4).

Due to the prevalence of age old feudal system the plight of peasants is pathetic. Urbanization is confined to the urban areas and the villages are still under the feudalism the credit for which goes to the state machinery. In feudal set up, there is a great divide between the landless peasants and the land owners. The peasants are the actual tillers of land. The peasants do not own any land and are always at the mercy of the landlords. They are starved off their produce.

Suryakant Sahay, the old headmaster lives in the heart of Durjanpur, runs a school for the kids of poor villagers. Muskaan, a girl of eighteen, orphaned in a train accident at a very young age is adopted by Sahay to assist him in his work. Muskaan helps him in running the school. Muskaan introduces Nora to her surroundings when she arrives in Durjanpur along with her troupe from Delhi. The landlords of her area are called as upper caste robbers by Muskaan (20). Through Nora and her theater troupe, Sahay wants to educate the poor, ignorant villagers about the perils of bonded labour. There are no prominent caste based boundaries in the village as compared to the class based boundaries between the rich and the poor and between the haves and the have nots. The peasants are tormented by the private armies of the landlord that are maintained to terrorize the downtrodden. Muskaan tells Nora, “People here are more concerned about exploiters and their private armies. That’s a fight for power “(20).

The life of the villagers in this part of the earth sans basic facilities. People are used to life without electricity, whereas for a city returned Nora it is difficult to get used to groping in the dark. The villagers can’t remember a day in their life as to when they have seen a bulb switched on whereas on the other hand Nora can’t forget a day in her life in the city when she had to go without electricity for just few hours. There are no pucca roads and other means of modern transportation when the world of space crafts and rocket science. There is only one rickety bus that runs from Banka and which is anytime susceptible to breakdown. Toilet is yet another basic necessity required for life. But for the poor peasants, toilet is a luxury they cannot afford. When Avadhut visits Durjanpur for the promotion of his business of toilet fittings, he meets Umed Choudhary. Umed Choudhary is from Chabutra and mocks at the poverty of villagers by saying:

“What? Ha, ha! Toilet? ha, ha!” He roared with laughter for full two minutes… “Mister, I really can see you are new here. They don’t have toilets, these beggars! See those over there? Does it look like you can do business with them? Hain?” (81)

The peasants are poor marginalized fellows and the condition of women is worse than the men. There is gender bias that can be seen in all quarters of life. In Sahay’s school there are fifty boys with no girls at all. Nora is surprised by their absence at which Muskaan replies:

“They learn to make chapattis at home”; Muskaan says

“That’s how it’s here”

“They should learn from your example”, I said
“If that happened you wouldn’t be here” said Muskaan.

…My dear sheherwali, women here are under double yolks. They are worse off than farm animals!

(22)

Women are hounded by the fear of the landlord and their armies. They are susceptible to being kidnapped, raped and then later thrown away. In Muskaan’s words, “The guards you know, their armed goons, come picking them like ripe berries off the branches, for their master’s delight as juicy fruits” (41).

Apart from the peasants and the women folk, environment is also a victim of oppression and marginalization due to the onslaught of industrialization. The ecological concerns are voiced in the novel through the protagonists when they say that the rivers are the worst affected and the water animals are on the verge of extinction. The turtles and the fish have become extinct species. Muskaan tells Nora:

Palash told me that the turtles were a dying breed in this region. They perished because of the tanneries pouring dirty stuff into the water. The government knew as usual, but took no action. The business from the large houses was too huge to slow down, so what if the water creatures died. Some of them were already endangered species. (30)

The Matia River which was once a symbol of culture and growth has turned slow and sluggish due to environmental pollution. Muskaan says, “The Matia flew slow and sluggish, chest deep in places, looking slimy green here and there. That was because of the sludge” (31)

The novel also undermines the role of democracy and justice. Are these words of any importance for the marginalized sections of the society? Justice for the poor proletariat is beyond their reach. The excerpts from Nora and Muskaan’s conversation reveal:

Ask any woman in this village or around the whole bajra belt. Come back and tell me how many of them ever got justice. They won’t even know the meaning of justice. Women don’t figure much in these places sheherwali. (46)

Justice, according to Muskaan is not meant for the downtrodden. It is a vague concept meant to be discussed in coffee houses of the cities. Muskaan has no faith over democracy, as democracy doesn’t ensure everything for everyone (46)

Child labour is another important kind of oppression that is discussed in the novel. The children of the proletariat work as bonded labourers in the remote and deeper areas of Bihar. They are mostly employed in hazardous factories and often work under difficult work conditions. They are underfed and underpaid. Nora’s play typically deals with bonded labour as North Bihar is a hot bed of bonded labour. Nora says:

We specifically chose a village called Durjanpur in North Bihar because that place was notorious for lawlessness, especially for employing child labor in the carpet, matchstick and candle making factories, bypassing all the existing regulations. Recent surveys mostly from the nonprofit organizations have shown the figures going bad to worse. (52)

It is for this reason that the landlords do not like Sahay. Teaching the children of peasants means a shortage of cheap labour in future. The novel paints a vivid picture of oppression faced by these simpletons due to the onslaught of capitalism and commercialization. The landlords, often backed by big business houses have high links in the state machinery. The state machinery is therefore misused by these people to terrorize the working class. The working class in the form of peasants and laborers are forcibly employed in the fields and factories. If anyone tries to resist or oppose, they are crushed to the bone by their private armies, which has come to light when Nora comes to know of IDPs. IDP’s are the internally displaced people who are provided relief and shelter at the camps organized by the insurgents. Palash explains to Nora:
Most of them are hounded out of their villages by landlords and their private armies. Some have had their male members killed, the women raped, their grains looted and standing crops and homes burnt down. (126-7)

People in certain areas have fled for their life, fearing the landlord’s army. What’s left behind is a few, “broken huts, burnt bricks strewn around, weed filled vegetable patches, and a handful of emaciated farm animals roaming around” (174).

People like Sahay, Muskaan and Avadhut belong to group of revolutionaries of the Bajra belt who fight for such atrocities. They have no faith in law and order and have resorted to the barrel to undo the wrongdoings of the landlords. On the other hand, the government has resorted to stringent measures to snub the heads of revolutionaries in the form of launching the hunting brigades. The private armies have been converted into state sponsored hunting brigades whose chief task is to comb the bajaran belt and kill whosoever seems suggestive of its link with the Maoists. In one such incident, the headmaster- Sahay, Muskaan and Nora are attacked unawares in the middle of the night. About fifty men armed with guns, swords and sticks attack their house. They ransack their premises suspecting of rebels and arms hidden. Since they couldn’t find any clues, they kidnap Muskaan and hold her captive at the chabutra to be raped repeatedly and Sahay is taken into police captivity. In Sahay’s words the hunting brigade is:

…a new offensive- a systematic and ruthless- launched by either the government, the landlords themselves or the state police against the landless farmhands and tribals. (142)

The new big enemy (143), that has newly taken over launches its first offensive at Durjanpur. After it successful trial, the government has decided to implement it in other states too as:

…in future, the hunting brigade would become the unofficial face of official liberties taken to trample upon the various revolutionary movements in the states of this country. Atrocities, murders, attacks, kidnaps, forceful cajoling, bribing with money and projects, bootlegging, practically anything that this falsehood called a nation cannot do openly and which it indeed does brazenly all the time, would be carried out by the new monster called the ‘hunting brigade’. (144)

The hunting brigades were credited with “reports of shootouts, encounter deaths, landmines blowing up camps and even villages. The police and the brigade members raided ordinary village schools and hospitals, arresting and beating up doctors, teachers and other folks” (192). It emerges as the future monster that has to its credit the killing of Palash and Arif too.

Therefore, it can be concluded that the novel under study is a discourse on the subalterns of the society who have resorted to violent means as recourse to reconciliation themselves to oppression and exploitation.

REFERENCES